Exploration Of The Role Of Reading Fluency In Grade 4 Learner's Comprehension In English First Additional Language Classroom In Dwaalboom Circuit, South Africa

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Abstract

The current research aims to assess the availability of inclusive leadership style within the General Secretariat of the Council among senior management and its impact on the implementation of e-governance by understanding its relationship and benefits in terms of control, speed in issuing and receiving orders and instructions, and utilizing it in alignment with international changes in leadership and its role in achieving integration in work through the necessity of improving relationships between different administrative levels, facilitating participation, expressing opinions, and fostering organizational belonging. The descriptive-analytical statistical method was chosen using SPSS V.25 software, employing various statistical methods and measures, including mean, standard deviation, variance, relative importance, and simple regression, through a questionnaire tool for data collection. The research community included leadership within the General Secretariat of the Council, where (87) questionnaires were distributed and (83) were received, while (4) incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the data analysis, resulting in a response rate of (95%). The main findings of the research indicate the presence of an impact of inclusive leadership style on the implementation of e-governance within the General Secretariat of the Council, through the availability of dimensions adopted in the current research, especially the openness dimension, which significantly contributes to harnessing inclusive leadership by investing in new opportunities to improve work procedures and quickly respond to employees' suggestions. The availability dimension, through the leadership's ability to handle work problems, allows employees to communicate and participate easily with the leadership to enhance work performance, as stated in the accessibility dimension. Additionally, to enhance these capacities, the inclusive leader must be enthusiastic, communicative, and proficient in communication skills, capable of making appropriate strategic decisions, adapting to the increasing variables in the world, such as technological, social, and environmental changes, and able to prioritize and achieve the targeted goals.

1. Introduction

Reading fluently is an important link between word analysis and comprehension (Rasinski et al., 2020; Bouguebs, 2019; Khalid & Igbal, 2021; Maki & Hammerschmidt-Snidarich, 2022). Fluency is measured through the reader's comprehension and noting the words read. Oral reading for fluency (ORF) refers to the ability to read with accuracy and with meaningful oral expression (Aldhanhani and Abu-Ayyash, 2020). In contrast, non- fluent readers read slowly and laboriously often stopping to stare at words or sounds them out (Khalid & Igbal, 2021; Dowd & Bartlett, 2019; Kwon & Kang, 2019). Non- fluent readers may read words correctly but slowly and without much expression. ORF is measured through the timed reading of a list of words of increasing length and complexity. In each case, words erroneously read are noted and subtracted from the total number of words read in a minute to give a score of words read correct per minute (WCPM) by reflecting on both accuracy and speed.

Several studies investigated the precursors to early reading skills that lead to fluency. According to Makebo, Bachore and Ayele (2022), learners with sensitivity to the sound structure of words learn to read more easily. However, Akan, Köçeri and Ulaş (2023) argued that oral language skills have shown to predict early reading in learners. Readers learn to integrate international patterns that help to mark syntactic phrasing within and across sentence boundaries through exposure and repeated practice. Therefore, the goal in reading comprehension is the recognition of words and punctuations, to work out the meaning of unfamiliar words and to reflect on what they have read. Reading for fluency in comprehension provides mutual support essential to succeed in any society (Psyridou et al., 2022). Allington (2021) and Alloway and Gathercole (2020) described reading fluency in a comprehension text as the fundamental skill for children and is seen as the key to knowledge that opens up many opportunities in the world.

Reading challenges are endemic in South Africa. Recent statics report on the high rate of primary learners who are not fluent readers. This brings down the overall performance of the results (DBE, 2021). The frustration shared by many Senior Phase teachers suggests problems at the foundation phase. In other words, learners who fail to learn to read fluently in previous grades of schooling are handicapped in later grades. This may result in poor readers not developing proper writing skills or become "literate", and do not develop naturally (Halle et al., 2019). The proper basic foundation to reading fluency is identified one of the causes of the learners' poor academic performance (Hussain & Suleman, 2019; Lin & Huang, 2019). This could be attributed to two key resources needed to teach reading fluency i.e. teachers and appropriate reading materials. In the South African context, rural schools often lack one or both of these resources. For instance, in disadvantaged and poor schools, lack of additional financial support makes it impossible for teachers to make classrooms conductive to reading because they rely on readers they borrow from other schools to teach reading and other resources like charts, newspapers, and books are unavailable. The physical classroom environment is also not conductive to maintaining a well-resourced class for reading and language acquisition, hence it is said that the more learners read, the better they become (Pretorius and Spaull, 2016; Lee & Chen, 2019). This suggests that reading fluency has a positive effect on the learner's vocabulary knowledge, spelling and writing. It is therefore the teacher's responsibility to develop reading habits in their learners in order to help them enhance the target language efficiency. The researchers observed that most learning at school depends on reading competence, which is a challenge to most teachers who teach English as First Additional Language. It could be concluded that reading fluency is important since it enables people to act creatively and critically in a competitive world because reading provides access to new information and knowledge. However, majority of schools in the Waterberg District have no access to libraries. This also impacts negatively on the quality of teaching and learning (DBE, 2021). On the other hand, one hour allocated for teaching reading is insufficient because teachers have to find ways and means to encourage learners to become good readers (Wang, Sabatini, O'reilly & Weeks, 2019; Kang & Shin, 2019). The researchers observed that most learners have poor reading skills, which lead to inability to recognize words, unable to decode words from the text, and poor pronunciations of words when reading aloud. This is attributed to their lack of foundation skills and motivation to reading and poor methods of teaching reading in primary schools. Nguyen, Del Tufo and Cutting (2020) indicated that learning to read is perhaps the most challenging goal that learners face in the first elementary school because that is where most instructions and training on reading should done. It is for this reason that this study investigated the factors that can be integrated in the classroom to develop reading fluency in grade 4 learner's comprehension text in Dwaalboom Circuit, Waterberg District, Limpopo province, South Africa.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Automaticity theory in reading for fluency by focusing on word recognition. The automaticity theory is defined as the ability to decode and comprehend a text by recognizing letters, associating sounds with letters, blending, segmenting, chunking, skimming, and scanning (Feruzi, 2021). Decoding, comprehension and attention are the three basic processes that all readers go through when reading a text. In this case, the automaticity theory promotes the use of text as a remedy, and this helps learners to develop their automaticity reading. This theory encourages teachers to use easier texts with struggling readers. Since this method relies on practice and drilling, it takes a lot of class time to ensure that learners succeed.

3. Aim of the study

This study aims to explore reading fluency among the Grade 4 learners in an English First Additional Language classroom at Dwaalboom Circuit in the Waterberg District, Limpopo province, South Africa.

4. Research objectives

The study's objectives are outlined as following:

 To assess reading challenges experienced by learners. To determine teaching strategies that EFAL educators in Dwaalboom Circuit can employ to develop learners' reading skills.

5. Research methodology

Researchers used qualitative approach to explore reading fluency among the Grade 4 learners in an English First Additional Language classroom at Dwaalboom Circuit in the Waterberg District, Limpopo province, South Africa. In this study, qualitative approach helped researchers to understand the difficulties experienced by grade four learners when striving for reading fluency in English First Additional Language classroom and determine teaching strategies that EFAL educators in Dwaalboom Circuit can employ to develop the learners' reading skills.

5.1. Sampling

This study used purposive sampling because it enabled researchers to identify participants who can provide indepth information about the difficulties experienced by grade four learners when striving for reading fluency in English First Additional Language classroom and determine strategies that EFAL educators in Dwaalboom Circuit can employ to develop the learners' reading skills. The researchers conveniently selected four Grade 4 EFAL teachers.

5.2. Data collection

Data were collected using the semi-structured interviews and observations understand the difficulties experienced by grade four learners when striving for reading fluency in English First Additional Language classroom and determine strategies that EFAL educators in Dwaalboom Circuit can employ to develop the learners' reading skills. The researchers interviewed four Grade 4 EFAL educators. The researcher observed learners reading in class focusing on decoding skills, fluency and word pronunciations during reading lessons. The interview session lasted for ±15 minutes with each participant.

5.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis method employed in this study was the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is used systematically to search for themes in data (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). In this study, the researchers organized the collected data under themes according to the research questions. The researchers used the open data

coding and, sorting and linking data into categories. The researchers read data several times until they reached a saturation point. The analysis of data was guided by the following research objectives:

- To assess reading challenges experienced by learners.
- To determine teaching strategies that EFAL educators in Dwaalboom Circuit can employ to develop the learners' reading skills.

6. Discussion of Results

This study aims to explore reading fluency among the Grade 4 learners in an English First Additional Language classroom at Dwaalboom Circuit in the Waterberg District, Limpopo province, South Africa. The data is analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method and presented through research questions as follows:

6.1. What are challenges experienced by learners in reading fluency?

Studies indicated challenges experienced by learners regarding reading fluency ranging from academic, social, cultural, linguistic, and economic which have an influence on learners' academic achievement at school (Mogano & Motlhaka, 2023; Cartwright et al., 2019). Teachers indicated the following challenges which have the potential of hindering learners' reading proficiency:

6.1.1. Lack of parental involvement

The lack of parental support is a challenge prevalent in South African schools as indicated below:

Teacher 1A

Parents do not help their children. There are many children who sit outside the school gate until 6 p.m. Those children whose homework is never done.

It was noted that many children are cared for by their grandmothers and the mother or father returns home at 9 or 10 o'clock in the evening after a day at work. There is no additional support from parents. Thaba, and Motlhaka (2022) found that learners are not proficient in English because they get less encouragement from their parents to practice speaking English at home. Teacher 1B

indicated following in support of Thaba, and Motlhaka's (2022) observation:

Most of the children they live with grannies, then there is no one to help them with their reading. Books are not purchased for them to read to perfect their fluency. School is the only time where they get a chance to read books.

Yildirim, Seyit, Çetinkaya and Tosun (2019) concurred that learners demonstrate higher academic and behaviour levels when parents are encouraging and involved in their school work. On the other hand, the findings indicate that parents are also unable to communicate with learners in English due to their level of education. Teachers observed that many parents don't support their children with their school which discourage them. Teacher 1C explained the following:

I have some children who do not read at home because their parents do not care. This makes it difficult for them to read in class and to do any work. During tests, you see them fail because they cannot read and they do not practice at home.

The reading effect on the other learning areas is vast when learners do not have support at home. This is more complicated when dealing with EFAL learners. These learners require much more exposure to English than only during school hours. Teacher 1D described her disappointment with regards to reading as follows:

When there is a child that struggles with reading and you get some progress with them, and then the parents at home neglect their reading, the child gets back and forget everything...and then you have to start all over again. So you do not have parents' support.

The findings of this study are supported by Roberston (2020) who found that parents who do not speak the school's language of instruction hold back their children's learning, especially for those living in poverty.

6.1.2. Lack of space and overcrowding in classrooms

The number of learners in a class influences the way an educator teaches. The teachers referred to the difficulties faced due to overcrowded classrooms as indicated below:

Teacher 1A stated that:

The challenge is there, these classrooms are too small. To give maximum support to 50 learners is very difficult. You find that those lagging behind would always lag behind because you cannot give that maximum support to them. Especially when teaching fluency in reading to those learners who face an added barrier to learning.

It is essential that educators have time and resources to offer interventions to learners. Olaleye et al. (2017) asserted that overcrowded classes significantly influence the learners' behavioural attitude to their studies. Overcrowded classes negatively affect the learners' academic performance especially in public schools. When observing reading lessons in all the Grade 4 classes, the lack of classroom space was noticeable. When group reading took place, the front desk had to be moved back a little and the learners crammed awkwardly. The learners were not able to sit on the carpet. The class teaching and explanations were done while learners sat at their desks. With that situation, the teacher found it hard to facilitate and teach reading fluency especially to those learners who struggle to read a single word. All four educators identified this as a common challenge to them.

6.2. What teaching strategies teachers use when teaching fluency in reading to English First Additional Language learners in Grade 4?

This question seeks to determine teaching strategies used by teachers teaching fluency in reading to English First Additional Language learners in Grade 4. Participants revealed that learners responded best and learn most effectively through the use of visual aids. This improved their English understanding levels and kept them interested for longer periods, hence, teacher 1A, teacher 1B and other two Grade 4 EFAL educators agreed that when introducing new words, placing a picture next to each word was an effective strategy. This idea was also evident in the classrooms when action words, emotions. body parts, number words and colour words were linked to pictures. The association of pictures with words increased comprehension of English First Additional Language learners. When teachers were asked about resources that they felt it would be beneficial to understanding English comprehension and the teaching of reading fluency, teacher 1C stated that DVDs of stories with words reflected on the screen or CDs with rhymes attracted learners' attention. Teacher 1B agreed that stories on CDs with music were valuable. Although none of the Grade 4 classrooms observed were equipped with resources to facilitate the use of projectors, teacher 1C felt that during oral reading a slide show could be made to introduce words in a comprehension text and have pictures accompany them. As learners listen on how a word is pronounced, they improve their fluency skill. Currently, learners grow up in an age of technology where globalization is real.

The teacher also indicated that allowing learners to act out words or stories was also effective in teaching reading fluency. Teacher 1D made reference to the use of flannel boards, which not only draw attention but allow learners to experience the characters and use their English language skills. Similarly, Teacher 1A mentioned that learners in her class enjoyed acting out the story using masks depicting the story's characters. However, teacher 1D reflected on challenges that a lack of time poses. She said the following:

If we had time we could have worked on building vocabulary first but the lack of time impacts what we do.

In all the three Grade 4 class, before reading commenced, it was observed that questions were posed to learners to establish background knowledge, prepare them for new language presented in the text. Teacher 1A used a picture walk where learners looked at the picture in the text and discussed what they saw on each page. She made learners act out the expression seen in the story which allowed the teacher to assess comprehension of what was read and assess fluency. Teacher 1D stated that:

We can also use a method of predicting where learners look outside the book and predict what the story is about.

Teacher 1A also used this method which encouraged reading for fluency by asking; "What do you think the hippo would have said?" Or "Why do you think his face is red?" Using the questioning and predicting strategies during reading lessons allowed learners the opportunity to express themselves and develop their fluency skills in reading. The final strategy for improving reading fluency in a comprehension is the use of the learners' home language when teaching time. To some learners, English is their third language.

Teacher 1B said:

I would prefer to have let us say the reader that I have in English, it must be in their language as well. They start

learning it in their language before proceeding to the language of teaching because they know it, they understand it in their language. I think it would be easier for them to progress to the actual learning and teaching of reading fluency skills.

During observation of Teacher 1D's lesson, she would guide learners during reading and allow them to listen and underline words they find difficult to pronounce and the teacher would pronounce the word and explain its meaning in the text. When teachers were asked what they have experienced as the most important element when teaching reading fluency to Grade 4 learners, Teacher 1A stated that "Knowledge of sounds and phonics". Teacher 1B agreed that the sounds have to be worked on before attempting to read words or sentences. Teacher 1C said "Sounds recognition is the most important." Teacher 1C made a point that,

Sounds are important as once learners have grasped them, it is easier for them to read the word fluently.

While observing reading lessons in Grade 4 classes, it was evident that phonics was the favoured strategy for reading new words and unseen texts. Teachers guided learners and encouraged them to use this strategy. Rowel et al. (2019) observed that the introduction of sound-letter patterns makes the transition to early reading fluency and spelling much smoother. Teachers further demonstrated that phonics instructions teach decoding of letters into respective sounds.

In one of the Grade 4 classroom, the letter land programmer was used to teach the sounds. The programmer, teacher 1A used included songs to which learners could sing along. In teacher 1B's classroom, a phonic approach was also used. Learners were required to sound out sight words and new words founds in text and then build words using Abacas during observations of the reading lessons. These cards had letters and learners build various words in pairs. When observing reading lesson in Teacher 1C's class, learners played a game where learners had to identify the beginning sounds of the words. Teacher 1A stated that from experience she has learned that:

If learners do not have good phonic knowledge and are poor readers, their sentence building would be poor when reading and they would be unable to read fluently. The learners that were more advanced work at a faster pace and their spellings are very good. Teachers also mentioned whole word approach to teaching reading during one-on-one interviews. It was noted that high frequency words or sight words were commonly placed on flashcards as well as new words present in a reader. During the one-one interviews, teacher 1B referred to the use of flash cards of the high frequency words. She stated that after their introduction to learners, learners are required to use those words in sentences. This increases the comprehension of words for English First Additional Language learners. It is necessary for learners to have a thorough understanding of the words before reading books commenced. Feast (2020) and Macmillan (2019) indicated the importance of using approaches to teaching reading as it may impact the learners to master comprehension and learn to master English language. Furthermore, Feast (2020) and Macmillan (2019) indicated that it is through the use of different strategies for learners to better their language acquisition. Teacher 1D indicated that she and her learners begin with building up words using sounds, repeat the sight words, and then progress to reading sentences, paragraphs, and finally stories. During observations, teacher 1D used this strategy by using a game, which learners enjoyed, where each learner was given two flash cards of high frequency words. Later in lessons, learners had to give a clue about their words and the other tried to guess what it was. Teacher 1C applied the same strategy as she indicated below:

You start with sounds, then introduce words, then there is something to do with the meaning of words, then you make them read the word again within the text.

It became evident that a critical element of using high frequency words and flashcards increase learners' reading fluency skill. The participants revealed that they did not only use one strategy when teaching reading fluency in this grade. It was common practice amongst the four teachers that a combination of strategies was used. Each of the four lessons observed at the school were presented differently and aimed at improving a variety of skills. For instance, teachers used phonics as well as a whole word approach to reading and felt that this was effective. Teacher 1A referred to her success stories in the past years by indicating the following:

I have had quite a good progress where you take a child from this level and then by the end of the year see that child being, you know, a fluent reader.

Teacher 1C also believed in this strategy as a success story when she said the following:

I have heard positive feedback from my Grade 4s that they are coping well. I think my reading strategy works well.

A combination of approaches proved to be effective in teaching reading fluency to English First Additional Language learners.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to explore reading fluency among the Grade 4 learners in an English First Additional Language classroom at Dwaalboom Circuit in the Waterberg District, Limpopo province, South Africa. The study found that EFAL learners' English language proficiency had an impact on their reading fluency abilities. The development of English comprehension and vocabulary was a focus point in the reading fluency strategies that teachers implemented. However, the pace of teaching needs to be adjusted to enhance comprehension. The EFAL learners' poor performance in reading fluency and across curricula calls for the development and implementation of EFAL curriculum in South African schools.

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